

MEAG Initial Position Paper – January 2011

Introduction

This position paper reflects the initial consolidated views of the Mayor's Expert Advisory Group on Serious Youth Violence in London.

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A. The Facts

19 young Londoners died in 2010 (higher than it was before the massive rise that occurred catching many off guard in 2007). This level of violent youth crime is naturally a serious matter of concern for London. The indications are that the significant majority of murder/violence victims and perpetrators are Black, young and male. Over the last 5 years, 101 teenagers have been murdered in London (since 1 Jan 2006). Despite making up only 15% of London's youth population, Black and Mixed-Race teenagers represent at least 70-80% of these fatalities.

The indications also are that the high levels of overall fatal incidents have remained largely static for the last two decades but, specifically, in light of the disproportionate rise in Black on Black violence, precious little has been done to get to the heart of the matter. Whilst it should be acknowledged that there has been a long list of central and local government initiatives, the point is that these have been seen to be largely ineffective in preventing (and often in responding to) the recent growth in SYV.

Black young people are significantly overrepresented as perpetrators of Violence Against the Person (VAP) offences dealt with before London's Youth Courts. In 2005/6, 41% of the 4424 Youth Court disposals for VAP in London related to Black young people - an overrepresentation of almost 200%.

As such, we must conclude that the blood will continue to run in London's streets into 2011 and beyond.

Police notifiable offences give an account of reported incidents but a better indication of the scale of the problem in urban areas may be found in hospital accident and emergency data.

Figures from the youth justice system seem to reflect the violent events of the streets. Compared to overall number of Black youth, disproportionate numbers go through the Courts across a number of different crimes. By 2008/9, the total number of VAP offences dealt with in London Youth Courts had risen by 11% to 4949. 43% of these disposals related to Black young people. In Lambeth (as an example of a borough with a large Black population), the proportion of young Black people convicted for VAP was 84.3%. To put these numbers into context, Black and Mixed race youths make up 22% of London's youth population but they consistently account for a disproportionate amount of disposals for robbery and offences of VAP before London's Youth Courts.

In 2005/6, 59.4%¹ of robbery disposals dealt with in London related to Black young people from a total of 2084 - representing a disproportionality of almost 300%! By 2008/9, the number of robberies dealt with in London's Youth Courts had risen by 22.5% to 2554. Of these, 59.2% of the disposals again related to Black young people. Again in Lambeth, the proportion of Black young people convicted of robbery during this period was 84.5%.

These figures reflect anecdotal feedback from both professional and community sources and reflect a range of deeper, underlying issues. Current policy and practice must move away from criminalising Black youth and pathologising the families and areas where they live. A new generation of modern urban problems need to be recognised and addressed in ways that do not simply reduce or contain violence but effectively prevents serious youth violence in London. Reduction per se is not an acceptable target – the goal has to be prevention.

Despite a growing problem there has been no political champion. The fact that over the past two decades policy and practice have failed to effectively and consistently address this extreme and sustained disproportionality in an informed manner is disturbing and poses dangerous consequences for London's future.

B. The Mayor's request

The Mayor, in November 2008 launched Time for Action (TfA) which for the first time implements a programme to address youth violence in London but is seen as failing to explicitly acknowledge or set out specific action that prevents the disproportionate level of serious youth violence in the Black community.

In June 2010, the Mayor held a summit with practitioners from the Black community on preventing youth violence and in July 2010, in recognition that TfA had not sufficiently addressed or engaged with the Black community, the Mayor assembled a team of leading community practitioners with significant expertise with regard to youth crime and violence experts formally requesting that they assist in developing a London-wide programme of action. The Mayor's Expert

¹ YJB Annual Workload data

Advisory Group on Serious Youth Violence (MEAG) was set up in September 2010 and its current members are:

Ray Lewis (Chair) – Director, Eastside Young Leaders' Academy
Viv Ahmun - ex Chief Exec., Involve
Bevan Powell – Chair, Met Black Police Association
Nims Obunge – Chief Exec., Peace Alliance
Richard Taylor – Founder, Damilola Taylor Trust

C. The nature and cause of the problem

The roots and causes of serious youth violence in London are not only complex but change over time and between areas. There is widespread speculation about a range of risk factors such as poverty, deprivation, social exclusion, workless families, low educational attainment, school exclusions, high NEET rates etc. In light of the failure in community safety or policing policy to make an appreciable impact of patterns of serious youth violence there remains widespread official confusion about the nature of the problem and what works in practice. Much of public sector “top down” provision is devoid of a unclear understanding or description of the problem of serious youth violence that take place in local neighbourhoods throughout the capital.

Community-based interventions are increasingly being recognised as providing valuable insight to the drivers of the retaliatory violence that takes place between groups of young people from distinctly different geographic areas, commonly referred to as postcode violence. Emerging research is starting to offer fresh insight to the youth “gang” phenomena and how this might be related to serious youth violence. These “bottom up” perspectives views an emerging/worsening violent youth culture, and its association which the serious and often fatal incidents involving guns and knives.

Project Oracle will play an important role in developing a framework for measuring “what really works” in tackling serious youth violence. However, a continuing lack of a coherent understanding and rationale for explaining the complexities and dynamics of the underlying causes for serious youth violence in London will serve to undermine its effectiveness. Any future programme or strategy must clearly target specific drivers and make early intervention on the causes of SYV. Any failure to more accurately gauge what types of interventions are needed, how the range of provision impacts the types and of deviance and crime linked to young people in different parts of London will result in serious public health, and community safety issues. Therefore a programme of research is essential to provide that coherent understanding and rationale of serious youth violence in London (which, disproportionately, relates to the Black community).

D. The Issues

Recognising community perspectives

Pockets of high levels of violent crime are found to overlap areas with high a large Black community. These have traditionally received sporadic and unsustained investment in developing social capital or community capacity to develop local solutions to the problems the serious youth violence problems they face. It is therefore important that efforts to address serious youth violence in London engage the community, which is most directly affected in partnership in identifying priority concerns and the most effective solutions.

London's Black community has for decades through self help and community organising sought to deal with the consequences of social exclusion and discrimination. Their engagement as part of the Big Society will require intentionally focussed partnership working to ensure that key local issues are included in future strategic planning.

Selected Key Issues

While the causes and drivers of serious youth violence are complex and dynamic a small number of key issues stand out as having likely special importance.

Parents / Families

It is important to develop a narrative, which addresses the challenges of families beyond current popular "broken Britain" thinking.

Linking anti-social and violent behaviour in young people to poor parenting skills and dysfunctional families would be an oversimplified explanation for serious youth violence. Whilst a number of dysfunctional family units do exist, it should be recognised that many perpetrators and victims of serious youth violence come from families with positive value systems who simply "lose the battle" to control their children, whilst living in an environment that is structurally unequal (poor community safety, poor education, poor health care, poor employment opportunities further compounded by discrimination).

It is therefore important that effective debate/consultation is held with the community to influence and shape the premise and content of family intervention programmes and support mechanisms.

Schools (literacy, exclusion, underachievement)

A range of longstanding issues relating to education have been identified as critical factors in terms of young people's social experiences. Trends relating to

underachievement, exclusions and more recently literacy all serve to influence young people's likelihood of social exclusion, offending behaviour and participation in serious youth violence.

Under achievement: The failure of a significant numbers of black boys in achieving five good GCSEs (A-C grade) is well known. Increased attainment of black boys must be a priority for London borough councils and schools.

Illiteracy in secondary schools: An increasing number of students are entering secondary education without having achieved a functional level of literacy. This often affects subsequent engagement and behaviour in secondary schools and is often not remedied by the time the young person has reached 16.

Exclusions (permanent and fixed period): we already know that children excluded from school are six times more likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system and that this disproportionately impacts black children. London schools should be dissuaded from excluding students except in the most exceptional cases. Instead provisions should be made within schools to have exclusion units within the school where behaviour issues can be addressed but crucially the child will still have access to education (these units could be run by third sector organisations in partnership with the school and the child's parent/carers). In addition exclusion should also trigger a review of the needs of the child including assessment of literacy, and assessment of factors impacting behaviour as a result of home life i.e. domestic violence etc.

Guidance for schools in teaching and pastoral care for Black boys

The overrepresentation of low achievement and high exclusion rates for black boys, reflects an ongoing and fundamental challenge for many schools. There are still many anecdotal cases and exclusions challenged on the basis that the school has conflated 'gang culture' or 'street culture' with issues such as an 11 year old boy wearing 'corn row' plaits which the school interpreted as 'an aggressive and unwelcome badge of ethnic identity'.

It is important that schools develop practice and promote an environment which raises the self-esteem and aspiration of Black pupils rather than reinforcing negative stereotypes and further marginalising cohorts of young people.

Stop and Search

Analysis by the London School of Economics and the Open Society Justice Initiative found that there are 41.6 Section 60 searches for every 1,000 Black people, compared with 1.6 for every 1,000 White people – making Black people 26.6 times more likely to be stopped and searched. Asians were 6.3 times more

likely to be stopped than whites, according to the analysis of Ministry of Justice figures for 2008-09.

The data reveal a marked escalation in relative searches of ethnic minorities in England and Wales. In the previous year, Black people were 10.7 times more likely to be stopped than Whites, and Asians 2.2 times more likely. Ben Bowling, professor of criminal justice at King's College London, said: "The police are making greater use of a power that was only ever meant to be used in exceptional circumstances and lacks effective safeguards. This leaves room for increased stereotyping which is likely to alienate those communities which are most affected".

Operation Blunt has been put forward as a response to increasing levels of knife and gun crime among young Londoners. However, the figures reflect that an overwhelming proportion of Section 60 Stops have been aimed at young Black people in London, the vast majority of whom are innocent of any crime and not participants in 'gang culture' or serious youth violence. It is important to recognise the psychological impact of Stop and Search on young Black people who are targeted, and often feel stigmatised by the experience.

Stop and Search is a traditionally contentious issue for the Black community in London. The use of SUS and stop and search was recognised by the Scarman Report as a contributory factor for the disturbances in Brixton and Tottenham in the 1980s. The relationship between the Black community and the Metropolitan Police was further examined by the MacPherson report which identified institutionalised racism following the Met's failed investigation of the Stephen Lawrence murder.

It is therefore important that a constructive and open dialogue is maintained to ensure that policing in the capital protects London's teenagers without serving to further marginalise specific groups.

Impact of structural inequality not recognised

Serious youth violence is most concentrated in areas affected by deprivation and worklessness. London's Black community is disproportionately located in areas of higher deprivation and worklessness and is in turn disproportionately affected by these issues.

25% of London's children live in workless households but in Inner London this rises to 32% (National level 15%)². Black African children in London are almost twice as likely to grow up in a workless household as children from a White British background.

² London Child Poverty Survey

| | | |
|--|-----------------|-----|
| % Children in Workless households by background ³ : | Indian | 11% |
| | White British | 20% |
| | Black Caribbean | 31% |
| | Black African | 39% |

It is therefore important to recognise the impact of structural inequality on London's Black community and consider its effect as a contributory factor for serious youth violence.

State of Voluntary Sector

Project Oracle will play an important role in identifying the causes and developing a framework of evidence for projects addressing serious youth violence in London. Whilst the development of such a framework is welcomed, it is important that voluntary sector groups are able to access capacity building support, which will allow them to develop effective practice within the community.

E. The Initial Recommendations

Whilst the Time for Action programme is welcomed as a reflection of the Mayor's commitment to tackle serious youth violence in London, it is noted that there does not seem to be a clear recognition of how this issue centrally orientates around the Black community and that, beyond the Mayor's Mentoring Programme, there is little consideration of the deep-rooted issues which see a disproportionate number of young Black people affected by youth crime and violence in London.

Further action is recommended in order to develop a more long term approach to addressing the issue and preventing the problem:

1. Closer work with the community is needed

A more mature, informed, and joined up debate within the Black (Caribbean and African) communities is needed in London about how communities experience serious youth violence and develop internal mechanisms for dealing with it, protecting their children and themselves from it. That debate needs to take place in an environment where Black people are talking to themselves about themselves, strengths, failings, collusion and all; deepening their understanding of the issues, and potential support networks.

While it is advantageous for the Mayor to have or facilitate those community conversations, it could be argued that without the prior step of encouraging or

³ London Child Poverty Survey

facilitating such conversations among those communities themselves, the Mayor is likely to find either that the same group(s) of people who routinely talk to one another as practitioners or organised groups in the community are having that conversation in front of him and his officers, with the MEAG just giving validation to the process.

Engagement with communities should be aimed at developing a more community-centric approach as well as establishing stronger support for parents and families.

In addition, keeping the community informed about what the Mayor (and others) are doing to address (the root causes of) youth violence is critical. This would include keeping the community informed about TfA.

A “community strand” encompassing the above would assist in progressing the issue. This may include summits/conferences with adults and/or youths.

2. A Medium / Long term strategy is needed

The problem of youth violence in London (at a worrying level) has existed for two decades but without a coherent strategic approach to comprehend and address it. The Mayor should put in place an eight year strategic plan that would clearly state the issues that need to be grappled with, would set out the core programmes of work and that, through ring-fencing appropriate levels of funding, would seek to take a long term, sustainable approach for tackling the problem of serious youth violence in London.

3. Clear understanding of the nature and extent of London’s SYV

Whilst the “traditional” risk factors that are often quoted will go some way to explaining the phenomenon that London has experienced over the past 20 years, they clearly cannot be telling the whole story. Further analysis/research is required to properly unearth why youth violence has particularly and specifically been an issue for the Black community in London. Once this understanding has been established, appropriate, fruitful and cost-effective actions can then be developed/commissioned to achieve the long-term change that is sought.

A study scoping the nature and extent of serious youth violence in London, and the use of weapons among young people will also give a definitive sense of the size of the “at-risk” cohort that work to tackle serious youth violence may need to be focused on. This will provide a much needed sense of the context, and serve to avoid conflating young Black people as a whole as potential perpetrators of serious youth violence.

4. Parents and Families

The outcome of any analysis/research is very likely to include the need for constructive engagement around parenting and family life. This engagement should be embarked upon early.

5. Learning from recent partnerships should be pulled together

A range of work has taken place in recent years, in many cases retreading ground already covered by previous boards or committees. A consolidated report, which organises the learning and thinking developed to date, will provide a useful platform for work going forward.

6. Helping communities in crisis

When incidents of serious violence (or threats of violence) occur, individuals, families, friends and wider circles are often left in shock, fear and trauma about what steps to take. Clear guidance should be given to relevant agencies/authorities in London about how to help communities and individuals when facing such crises.

7. Work in schools and the education system is needed

A comprehensive framework is needed for the development of effective practice to address the ongoing problems of low attainment, exclusions and literacy in schools. The Mayor should engage with the Dept. of Education, Head teachers and Chairs of Governors to develop practice within schools which positively addresses the issues.

8. More Effective Engagement of Young people is needed

The role of young people in articulating the issues that affect them should be recognised. The Mayor should consider establishing a conference on the scale of the London Schools and the Black Child conference, to facilitate discussion among Londoners in order to gain a better insight into their priorities.

9. Mayor's Mentoring Programme

The Mayor's TfA proposals for a regional programme of Black men mentoring Black boys are long overdue and very welcome. The start of the programme is eagerly anticipated and it is recommended that the programme, if successful, should be sustained at least over the period of the above proposed 8-year strategy.

That focus on the interaction between Black men and boys is what makes this programme distinct and what is more likely to make it successful.

10. Project Daedalus

The Mayor's Project Daedalus, as part of TfA, has already indicated promising success and is welcomed. Further analysis of the profile of the inmates going through the Heron Unit may highlight whether engagement around their possible mental health / identity needs may contribute to more sustained results after release.

F. Concluding Remarks

Following its first six months of existence, the above represents the MEAG's (community practitioners) initial position and considered thoughts/recommendations, to the Mayor, on London's serious youth violence.

It is hoped that this position paper can form the foundation of a discussion with the Mayor and his Advisors to develop an effective long-term approach to addressing and preventing the serious youth violence that has particularly impacted on the Black community in London and that has affected the sense of well-being and safety of all Londoners.

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Community Practitioners of the Mayor's Expert Advisory Group
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We are grateful for the previous contributions of Professor Gus John.